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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000466

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY'S LOCAL ELECTIONS: MARGIN OF AKP VICTORY
WILL DICTATE POLICY DIRECTION

REF: ADANA 16

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Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4(b,d)

11. (C) Summary: PM Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) will easily come in first on March 29, when 48 million voters will go to the polls to elect approximately 2,300 mayors and almost 100,000 other local officials. The referendum-like quality of the elections has largely played into the hands of Erdogan, who hopes that the overarching popularity of AKP on a national scale will carry it to victory in close races and in provinces where opposition parties are traditionally strong. Although AKP is unlikely to achieve Erdogan's previous aim of winning 50 percent of the vote and capturing the opposition "castles" of Diyarbakir and Izmir, it should fend off any rumblings of an imminent decline, by winning 40 percent -- an arbitrary psychological threshold that has been set to define continued AKP dominance of Turkish politics. The degree of victory will dictate the tone, and very likely the substance, of AKP's political agenda. A status-quo win of 40-45 percent should encourage AKP to focus on constitutional and EU reforms and seek a greater degree of consensus with the opposition. A higher result could prod an overconfident AKP to ignore the need for cooperation, a strategy that would further polarize Turkish politics. A lower result could put AKP on the defensive, emboldening the obstructive tactics of the opposition. End summary.

March 29 Local Elections

12. (C) Three days before elections, most analysts are predicting that AKP will win between 40-45 percent of the national vote for Provincial General Assemblies -- where voters elect parties, not individual candidates -- followed by the Republican People's Party (CHP) in the 25 percent range, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) in the 15 percent range, and the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) battling with AKP in the Southeast. Metropoll and Konda polling companies both predict that AKP will win 52 percent. This is the upper extreme of such projections. At the bottom end, A and G Polling predicts AKP will win only 39.8 percent.

13. (C) Turkish opinion polls are notoriously unreliable. The

questionable statistical methods many companies apply, such as in distributing undecided voters, conducting polls by phone rather than in person, and not employing Kurdish-speakers as pollsters in largely Kurdish areas, help explain the current wide variations. TESAV think tank President Erol Tuncer told us that personal and professional motives also influence the results. Tuncer said that because most companies vastly under-predicted AKP's 2007 success, some are now overcompensating by giving AKP a larger proportion of undecided voters, and as a result are predicting that AKP will secure more than half the vote. He also believes that A and G -- the only company that accurately called the 2007 election -- is deliberately distributing fewer votes to AKP because it wants to cement its reputation as successfully challenging the consensus view.

14. (C) Elections are set to continue the status quo in the key mayoral races. AKP is likely to hold Istanbul, CHP Izmir and the ultra-secular Cankaya municipality in Ankara, and DTP Diyarbakir. AKP could well lose tight races in the Adana and Sanliurfa, where incumbents left AKP to run under another party's banner (ref A). Its incumbent mayor in Ankara may also be in trouble. Other close races to watch are Eskisehir and Trabzon. Most districts will be able to announce their results within a day or two of polling. Larger municipalities make take slightly longer.

15. (C) During our travels around the country, campaigns in smaller cities have focused on typical local issues -- roads, water, and other municipal services. In larger municipalities, the election looks more like a referendum on AKP rule, and campaigns targeted national issues such as the economy and the popularity of party leaders. Epitomizing this new local elections phenomenon, during several rallies

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in Istanbul and Izmir, the national leader of an opposition party spoke while the actual candidate observed from the sidelines. The referendum-like quality of the elections has played into the hands of the still immensely popular Erdogan, whose storming out of the World Economic Forum summit in Davos in late January gave a massive boost to his domestic popularity and energized the AKP's campaign. AKP may also benefit by several percentage points, some pundits believe, if the national soccer team defeats Spain in a match that will be broadcast late at night on the eve of the election. Hurriyet Ankara Bureau Chief Enis Bergberoglu told us that such factors underscore how many Turkish voters are ruled by their emotions.

16. (C) Erdogan's tireless border-to-border campaigning in big cities and small towns reinforced with the masses the image of a passionate leader who is still fighting to wrench power from the traditional secular establishment, including the Dogan Media Group. On the growing economic crisis, Erdogan astutely and effectively shifted any blame to actors outside of Turkey. The back-to-back visits of Secretary Clinton and President Obama also reinforce efforts to portray Erdogan as a statesman with growing international clout. In our view, however, the election results are unlikely to change the fact that Erdogan is a shrewd but temperamental leader with a limited vision. AKP's massive mobilization of voters and targeted campaigning has been matched by opposition parties' inability to set forth a clear agenda or gain momentum on criticisms of AKP's economic record and ties to corruption.

17. (C) At this late juncture, wildcards such as a sharp collapse of the lira, a terrorist attack, or a military overreaction to Ergenekon detentions are unlikely but not outside the realm of possibility. Any legal challenges that marginal actors may raise to question the overall legitimacy of elections are unlikely to gain traction, according to our contacts. TESAV's Tuncer noted that all parties had shown respect for the Supreme Election Board's (YSK's) recent pragmatic work-around, in which it will allow those who do not meet the requirement that all voters must possess a

recently-issued ID card with a unique ID number to vote by obtaining a notarized letter from a population office. He believes the overall legitimacy of the elections will not be at issue, even though the results in a handful of races may be challenged, and legal appeals are likely to be pursued on issues of corruption, including the distribution of refrigerators in Tunceli.

Beyond March 29

18. (C) The local elections have overshadowed the domestic political agenda throughout late 2008 and 2009, as AKP dedicated an immense amount of time, money, and resources -- including the controversial distribution of state aid -- to boost its popularity. The post-election period will be a key test of whether the AKP remains committed to address issues it has ignored recently, from constitutional reforms associated with Turkey's EU bid to the deepening economic crisis. Speaking to reporters during recent campaign travel, PM Erdogan suggested that after elections AKP would introduce a package of constitutional amendments to limit the ability of courts to close a political party only to situations where the party supports terror and violence; set aside 100 seats in parliament that are not subjected to the normal 10 percent electoral threshold; and increase the number of Constitutional Court judges from 11 to 19 -- eight of whom would be elected by parliament instead of the current practice of appointment by the President.

19. (C) These proposals are likely to be fiercely contested by CHP and DTP, making their viability largely contingent upon AKP's willingness to engage constructively with the opposition. If AKP wins near or exceeds 47 percent, it is likely to display an overconfidence that will ratchet up tension, according to most of our contacts. A and G President Adil Gur told us that such a triumph would embolden AKP to the extent that it could disregard the need for consensus and try to push reforms through parliament with solely AKP and MHP support. (Comment: MHP contacts have

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told us that they are unlikely to enable such behavior by AKP. End comment.) Tuncer pointed to Turgut Ozal's Motherland Party of the mid-to-late 1980s as an example of how political hubris can undo a single-party government. An overwhelming win can lead to overconfidence, aggressive policies, internal strife, and eventual downfall.

10. (C) AKP Vice Chair Reha Denemec strongly disagreed with such assessments. He said that AKP would seek consensus on constitutional reforms, not least because it is mindful of the blowback it faced, including narrowly escaping closure by the Constitutional Court, when it launched its initiative to end the ban on the headscarf in universities. Parliament Speaker Koksal Toptan has said in recent months that after elections he will again try to pursue constitutional reform by establishing multi-party parliamentary committees to discuss various constitutional issues. (Comment: CHP has repeatedly said it will not participate in such committees unless AKP agrees to discuss terminating parliamentary immunity, a non-starter for AKP. End comment.).

11. (C) Conversely, our contacts believe that an AKP "loss" -- winning under 40 percent -- would increase economic uncertainty and instability, raise tension within AKP and therefore reduce its ability to effectively carry out reforms, and intensify CHP's inclination to attack AKP at every opportunity, to the detriment of developing its own agenda to lead Turkey. CHP already stubbornly resists AKP's attempts to enact EU reforms. CHP would be even less likely to cooperate on reforms if AKP is perceived to be floundering, as cooperating with AKP would be handing it "easy" political victories. Instead, CHP will be more likely to step up the introduction of censure motions against

ministers perceived to be corrupt, to increase negative rhetoric against AKP projects, and to begin a pressure campaign calling for early general elections.

¶12. (C) A status-quo election result where AKP wins 40-45 percent -- the most likely scenario -- is unlikely to diffuse the intense polarization in society, but may spur AKP to pursue compromise with the opposition, and engage a broader swathe of civil society, to enact reforms. AKP is most likely to reach out to MHP, with which it has been able to cooperate in the past on such delicate issues as diminishing the restrictions on the wearing of the headscarf and the election of Abdullah Gul to the presidency. Passing EU reforms with the cooperation of the MHP would go a long way to blunt the nationalist sentiments that CHP would try to rally against AKP. However, MHP will be only slightly less intransigent than CHP in its willingness to work with AKP.

¶13. (C) Goldman Sachs Global ECS Research division stated that an AKP victory of 40-45 percent would be the best result for markets because it would leave the domestic political landscape more or less unchanged, while allowing AKP to refocus on pressing economic issues, such as concluding a deal with the IMF. But even in this scenario, the economic outlook is bleak. The PM's pre-occupation with political issues and unwillingness to delegate has created a dysfunctional economic policymaking process that is hurting Turkey as it increasingly feels the effects of the global financial crisis. Private economists expect the economy to contract by 2 to 7 percent this year, with most economists revising their projections downward. Unemployment reached a 20-year high in December, with worse numbers expected for January and February. The government's profligate spending prior to the elections (they reached their projected budget deficit for the whole year in the first two months) is likely to restrict its ability to respond to public demands for stimulus and tax cuts in coming months, and make an agreement with the IMF more difficult to reach.

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